

# **THE ROLE OF INTERFAITH ACTIVITIES IN BUILDING PEACE**

## **Bahá'í Perspective**

**Presented by Suzanne Mahon at 3<sup>rd</sup> National Interfaith Forum  
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The secular conception of reality seems to be that people's happiness will be the natural result of better health, better food, better education, better living conditions..... As people of faith, I would say that all of us here today see reality as fundamentally spiritual in nature, and we would probably agree that there are laws that govern that reality's operation, just as there are physical laws such as gravity, that govern the operation of our physical world. The entire enterprise that we call civilisation is itself a spiritual process. The driving force behind the civilizing of human nature has been successive interventions of divine history. It has been through this influence that the innate moral and spiritual faculties of humanity have been gradually developed and the advancement of civilization made possible.

Had humanity seen the Divine Educators of its collective childhood in their true character, as agents of one civilising process, it would no doubt have reaped incalculably greater benefits from the cumulative effects of their successive missions. Instead, they have chosen to focus on the differences amongst the religions, differences which fall into the categories of either practice or doctrine. To argue that differences of regulations, observances and other practices constitute any significant objection to the idea of revealed religion's essential oneness is to miss the purpose that these prescriptions served. More seriously, it misses the fundamental distinction between the eternal and the transitory features of religion's function. The essential message of religion is immutable. Its role in opening the way for the soul to enter into an evermore mature relationship with its Creator—and in endowing it with an ever-greater measure of moral autonomy in disciplining the animal impulses of human nature—is not at all irreconcilable with its providing auxiliary guidance that enhances the process of civilization building.

Humanity has been on a journey that has brought us to the threshold of our long-awaited coming of age as a unified human race. New capacities have awakened in the earth's peoples that have transformed the material life of the planet. It is essential to make of these material advances vehicles for moral and social development. A central spiritual issue facing all people, whatever their nation, religion or ethnic origin, is that of laying the foundations of a global society that can reflect the oneness of human nature. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the unification of the earth's inhabitants is neither a remote utopian vision nor, ultimately, a matter of choice. It constitutes the next, inescapable stage in the process of social evolution, a stage toward which all the experience of the past and present is impelling us. Until this issue is acknowledged and addressed, none of the ills afflicting our planet will find solutions, because all the essential challenges of the age we have entered are global and universal, not particular or regional.

The many passages of Bahá'u'lláh's writings dealing with humanity's coming of age are permeated by His use of light as a metaphor to capture the transforming power of unity: "So powerful is the light of unity", He says, "that it can illuminate the whole earth". Bahá'ís are urged to find – within the suffering and breakdown of our times – the operation of forces that are liberating human consciousness for a new stage in its evolution. Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that "The wellbeing of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established" is a driver in all that Bahá'ís and their communities endeavour to do.

I have given the context in which I, as a Bahá'í, see the role of interfaith activities in contributing to peace. Because of its intimate relationship with the roots of human motivation, a loosening of the grip of religious prejudice is critically important. The elimination of prejudices of all kinds is an underpinning of unity and ultimately of peace. The process of interfaith dialogue and collaboration does an enormous amount to reduce religious

prejudice - one of the main blockages to a consciousness of oneness and unity.

All our interfaith activity must be aimed at more than simply achieving tolerance of each other. Tolerance is integration at a very superficial level, where an honest openness to all people is often absent. In contrast to this, the interfaith experience must be marked by a commitment to achieve genuine unity, where people of diverse religious backgrounds regularly serve, socialise and worship together, willingly and freely associating at all levels. This requires a strong committed body of people, working at a local level, who are consciously creating a global culture, a culture with a richness and depth that reflects humanity's oneness while also expressing its diversity. Interfaith activity has the potential, if undertaken at this deep level, to offer powerful evidence that individuals from every background can not only exist together in tolerance and harmony, but can also be motivated to strive to erase any vestige of prejudice from their own behaviour and thinking. This would also provide evidence that individuals at the grassroots level, when motivated by a vision based on spiritual principles, can become powerful agents for change in the surrounding society.

Thank you.